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ABSTRACT

Several questions are posed by this study which seeks to provide an indepth view of both the teacher's and the child's perspective of the inner city and environment. Among the questions are the following: whether the teacher's perception of the inner city child's environment would match the child's own perception; also given that a mismatch exists, would the teacher be able to alter his/her perceptions by discarding the myths in which he/she believes. An analysis of the data gathered from 78 children from elementary and secondary inner city schools in Montreal indicates that student teachers with minimal exposure to the inner city environment and those having few personal interactions with inner city children tend to view life in the inner city in terms of extreme poverty, deprivation, and degradation. A detailed analysis comparing the responses of those student teachers having no university training in inner city education reveals a marked misperception of the environment as compared with the perceptions of inner city children. In contrast, those student teachers with university training which includes a course on the urban child, tend to have perceptions which more closely approximate that of the inner city child. (Author/AM)

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CHANGING TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS: A LOOK AT THE INNER CITY CHILD'S ENVIRONMENT

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In recent years, investigators have begun to focus attention upon teacher values, attitudes, and belief systems and the effects of preconceived expectations on inner city children. (Becker, 1952; Corwin & Schmit, 1970; Miller & Woock, 1973; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968).

The value systems for people of every social strata tend to be based on personal experiences. It has been proposed that teacher values and attitudes are the product of the teacher's social class. In addition, these values positively influence the teacher's attitudes toward children who most closely approximate these values. (Rist, 1970).

A substantial number of teachers working in the inner city schools have been found to possess negative attitudes toward their pupils and would rather be in a different type of school. (Becker, 1952; Coleman, 1966; Herriot & St. John, 1966.) Corwin and Schmit (1970) found that twice as many inner city teachers (compared with teachers outside the inner city) requested placement transfers and that 45 per cent of these requests come from first and second year teachers.

Several studies have indicated that teachers tend to establish a set of expectations about the child's academic capabilities and behavior, based on social criteria and hearsay evidence, without first-hand interaction with the child (i.e. Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968).

One possible question arising from these studies concerns the type of teacher training offered at the University level. While it is unfair to focus on the poor quality of teacher training as the sole cause of problems which exist in the urban classroom, it is evident that a lack of understanding of the community, poor communication with the parents, inflexibility in altering teaching practices to suit the needs of the inner city child, and inappropriate values and attitudes, all combine to

impede the educational experiences of the inner city child.

Traditional programs for educating teachers have included a smattering of courses centered on urban education (urban sociology, the disadvantaged child, and the inner city child). Programs of this nature tend to concentrate on the use of numerous theoretical texts concerned with educating the inner city child. One theory is often advocated over another. (e.g. Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Morine & Morine, 1970; Smith & Geoffrey, 1968). Student teachers tend to express confusion concerning the appropriateness and educational values of the methods presented in these texts.

Courses have been varied by the introduction of popular books which provide a personal account of the author's trials and tribulations within the inner city school (e.g. Daniels, 1973; Dennison, 1969; Herndon, 1968; Koch, 1970; Kozol, 1967). Teacher trainees tend to relate to these books more readily, but often fail to develop their own personal philosophy for inner city teaching.

Several universities have initiated model classrooms for inner city children within the university setting (e.g. Institute for Developmental Studies); while others have developed pre-employment training programs directed at the new graduate (e.g. Western Michigan University). Miller and Woock (1973) report that attitudes toward lower class children and parents substantially improved after a fifteen week training session. It has been the authors' experience that programs which fail to integrate inner city field placements and observational assignments into the course of study, fail to significantly change teacher attitudes toward these children. One of the primary purposes of the present study is to empirically test this

hypothesis.

In 1974, research was begun in Montreal to explore the manner in which inner city and suburban children perceived and used the resources in their environment (Jacobs, 1975). The results indicated that inner city and suburban children expressed their values, attitudes, interests and needs in a similar manner. However, the findings clearly indicated that teachers and children within the inner city schools expressed divergent perceptions of the inner city child's environment. Interviews revealed that suburban teachers tend to perceive a much more pleasant environment than the suburban child described, while inner city teachers offered impressions of gloom, despair and depression which were the responses seldom expressed by inner city children.

Thus, the object of the present study was to provide an indepth view of both the teacher's and the child's perspective of the inner city environment. Several questions were posed:

1. Would the teacher's perception of the inner city child's environment match the child's own perception?

2. If a mismatch existed, would the teacher be able to alter her/his perceptions by discarding the myths in which he/she believed?

3. Could the use of a questionnaire, mapping of paths followed to school, videotaping of these paths and photographing of the child's home range (area where the child lives, plays and goes to school) be a satisfactory method of recording the child's perception of his environment?

4. Would the use of the above mentioned materials help to alter the teacher's perceptions of the child's environment where a mismatch of perceptions existed?

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 78 children from elementary and secondary inner city schools in Montreal. The children ranged in age from 4 years to 19 years with a mean age of 10 years 4 months. The group consisted of 34 males and 44 females.

The inner city population in Montreal can be divided into two distinct groups: 1) first generation immigrants (e.g. Greek, Chinese, Portuguese, Italian, West Indian) from a low socio-economic level; and 2) second and third generation Canadians from a low socio-economic level. In this study, 73 percent of the children were first generation immigrants and 27 percent were second and third generation Canadians.

The teachers chosen for this study were enrolled in courses in the education department of Concordia University. These university students were classified within three distinct units: 1) those with no exposure (no university training in inner city education N=15) 2) those with limited exposure (one university course on inner city education with a limited field work component, N=13) 3) those with extensive exposure (a specific course on the inner city child with field research and a placement component, N=9).

Instruments

A detailed questionnaire was developed to examine the child's perceptions of his environment. The items in the questionnaire sought to determine in depth, his perceptions of his home, neighbourhood, family, peer group, school and in general, his life style. Detailed biographical data was obtained from this questionnaire.

Included in the questionnaire were seven questions designed to elicit from the child, a non verbal response about his feelings concerning his environment. The child was required to respond to each question by circling the picture of the face which most closely represented his feelings.

Insert Figure I about here

(See Figure I.) Administration time for this interview was approximately one hour.

Procedure

Students enrolled in a university course (Urban Child) were instructed to explore specific aspects of the inner city community in accordance with a course outline. These students were then instructed to administer the questionnaire to ten children in their respective schools. The questionnaire was administered to each child individually and his answers were responded to with a nod of acceptance. The questionnaire was then administered to the three groups of teachers who were required to respond to the questions as they thought an inner city child might. This concluded the formal collection of data.

RESULTS

An analysis of the data clearly indicates that students with minimal exposure to the inner city environment and those having few personal interactions with inner city children tend to view life in the inner city in terms of extreme poverty, deprivation, degradation, despair, gloom and depression. A detailed analysis comparing the responses of those students having no university training in inner city education,

revealed a marked misperception of the environment as compared with the perceptions of inner city children. Their preconceived notions of the child's home environment (e.g. where the child sleeps, his family life, his eating patterns, his possessions) as being one of degradation and poverty, corroborates the stereotype view of inner city life. They fail to see the many positive experiences that these children have had (e.g. use of public transportation - buses, trains, boats, and travel, visits to museums, community camps and summer park programs) In addition, they tend to view the neighbourhood as one that is filled with factories, busy and unclean streets and where the children are compelled to play in the streets and alleys. In contrast, those students with university training which included a course on The Urban Child, field placements and observational assignments tend to have perceptions which more closely approximate the child's perception of his environment.

The myths of inner city life most commonly held by non-residents were examined in detail.

Insert Table I about here

Table I indicates the responses by inner city children and the university students to the questions which required the subjects to circle the face which most accurately represented their feelings about living in the inner city. Clearly, the perceptions of those students having optimal exposure most closely approximate the perceptions of the inner city children. However, the accuracy of their perceptions for the way in which children feel about their street is less clear.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Table 3 about here

Insert Table 4 about here

(See Table 2.) Reactions to school and teachers can be seen in Table 3 and Table 4. Here again, those who had university training, placement and observational assignments appear to have the most accurate perceptions. However, in both cases, these students tend to overestimate the children's perception by assigning a more positive rating than the children did.

The analysis of the data clearly indicates that the child's perception of his/her environment is most closely matched by the student having optimal training. Those university students with a minimal field placement appear to perceive the inner city environment from a perspective of gloom and despair. However, their perceptions are far less negative than those students having had neither training nor experience in inner city education.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study support the contention that teacher perceptions will more closely approximate the inner city child's perceptions when field work placements and observational assignments are

integral components of the teacher training program. In addition, the results clearly indicate that the teacher interviews with the inner city children (an essential part of the observational assignment) have been instrumental in providing more accurate information about the inner city than short field assignments.

Rist (1970) has noted that teachers tend to receive, on an informal basis, social information about their students. Reports from social workers, and other teachers who have had previous experience with the child and/or siblings, tend to influence the teacher's perceptions and expectations of the child. Data and information concerning each child should be individually collected, allowing for a more accurate perception of the child's world.

The environment in each inner city area in Montreal differs considerably. As a result, the perceptions of the residents differ, thereby necessitating flexibility of instructional methods and curriculum. The relevancy of curricula must take into account familiar environmental factors as well as the expressed needs and interests of the child.

Miller and Woock (1973) have suggested that training teachers in behavioral techniques may be more effective and beneficial than attempting to change their attitudes and misperceptions. However, in order to effectively provide meaningful reinforcement for the child, one necessary prerequisite might be a more realistic understanding of the child's environment.

The use of field placements and observational assignements in conjunction with a program which requires several in depth interviews with inner city children, appears to be a successful adjunct to traditional courses in inner city education. In fact, the interviewing technique which

allows the teacher to delve into the child's personal world has provided an ideal method for demythologizing many false assumptions. If teacher perceptions are altered to more closely approximate that of the child's (as the data would tend to indicate) future research should be directed toward the evaluation of changes in teaching methodologies and/or curriculum innovations. If relevancy of curriculum is a necessary correlate for academic and affective growth within the inner city, then demythologizing the erroneous myths and stereotypes that exist can only yield more positive results.

FIGURE I.

Faces Presented for Non Verbal Expression of Feelings

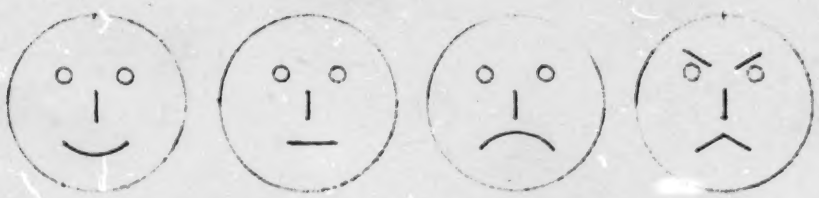


TABLE I

Percentages of Responses to Item I - Where Child Lives

Responses					No Reply
No Training	0	67	20	13	0
Training	7	70	23	0	0
Training & Placement & Indepth Analysis	56	44	0	0	0
Inner City Children	59	17	12	0	12

TABLE 2

Percentages of Responses to Item 2 - The Child's Street

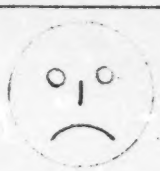
Responses					No Reply
No Training	27	40	13	13	7
Training	8	62	15	15	0
Training & Placement & Indepth Analysis	22	52	22	0	4
Inner City Children	41	30	10	6	13

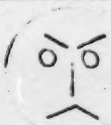
TABLE 3

Percentages of Responses to Item 5 - The Child's School

Responses					No Reply
No Training	20	40	20	20	0
Training	15	39	23	23	0
Training & Placement & Indepth Analysis	78	22	0	0	0
Inner City Children	53	23	8	3	13

TABLE 4

Percentages of Responses to Item 6 - The Child's Teacher

Responses					No Reply
No Training	0	20	13	60	7
Training	30	39	8	23	0
Training & Placement & Indepth Analysis	78	22	0	0	0
Inner City Children	62	12	6	8	12

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